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Friends in the North Eastern Region of Cuba: Over a Century of History

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Abstract

Friends Church, also known as Religious Society of Friends or Quakers, was the first protestant religious group to arrive to the North Eastern of Cuba, a region occupied today mainly by the current province of Holguín. The Quakers started their evangelization and settlement by Gibara (a municipality of Holguín), then to extend their work to Holguín, Banes and Puerto Padre (other municipalities) and other adjacent areas to these cities. Their work included the building of temples and schools transmitting the beliefs of the group and creating this way a social work as much as a religious one, which made the Quakers earn the respect and admiration of followers and people in general. Their social and cultural contributions get to these days, when it has been 113 years since the landing of the first Quakers. This research is an attempt to show through a brief socio-historic analysis the value of this religious group when it comes to their heritage and history.

Key words: Quakers; Work; Temples; Schools; Value; Heritage; History

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The Friends was the first protestant religious group to arrive to the North eastern region of Cuba. The work created by this group is already an important part of the identity of the people who inhabit this region. The contributions of the group get to our days claiming for recognition since they can be considered as part of our

cultural heritage, mainly in the Eastern region, an area known for Quaker presence since nowhere else in Cuba there was the settlement of Friends Church with such representativeness.

1. THE ORIGIN OF FRIENDS

The Friends, Quakers or Society of Friends is a protestant group appearing in England by half of the XVII century. Founded by George Fox, the alternative was looking for a simpler form of Christianity, by being against the Calvinist theology and any ecclesiastic authority. First, they were called "Sons of the Light" or "Friends". They use for the first time the expression "Society of Friends" in 1665 and "Quaker" was given to Fox and his followers by Judge Bennett in Derby, England in 1650 while he was judged because of his practices. Fox asked the Judge to "quake before the word of the Lord" and the Judge called him "Quaker", opprobrious name, later the group's proud name. Among the main beliefs of the group are the internal light ("light that illuminates every man who comes to this world", John I, 9), social and international peace and the spiritual democracy where men and women are equals. Some elements they maintain today in their gatherings are the purpose of spiritual communion, meditation and common prayer.

2. EXPANSION OF QUAKERISM TO THE UNITED STATES

Quakers expanded soon to several countries, among which we find the United States. The first Quakers in North America were Mary Fisher and Ann Austin, who arrived in 1656 to Boston, though their practices were rapidly condemned by the puritan authorities. In 1681, William Penn, close follower of Fox's doctrines, creates a colony in Pennsylvania where he puts into practice the principles of the group.

3. ARRIVAL OF QUAKERS TO CUBA

Cuban Quakerism had its origin precisely in the Friends of the United States and of Mexico. The United Fruit Company, American company already established in Cuba by the beginning of the XX century, also had its influence on the matter. Around 1897, Captain Lorenzo Baker, who was an employee of the United Fruit Co., and following the company's interests of domination, asked two Quakers he knew, Zenas Martin, superintendent of the Annual Board of Iowa, and Benjamin Trueblood, the beginning of a mission in Cuba (since some time before in the capital, Havana, a man named Francisco Cala was working on behalf of the group, but his actions didn't pay back).

In spite of the continuous relations of Zenas Martin with the company, he saw the danger of relating the work of the Friends to the American capital and domination, so he decided to begin the work by Gibara, an area where the company didn't have investments. In this way, on November 14, 1900, the first five missionaries landed in Gibara: Sylvester and May Jones, Emma Phillips, María de los Ángeles Treviño and Francisco Martínez, later joined by Martin himself. They started the work in Gibara and in 1901 Zenas Martin moved to Holguín where he began to organize gatherings. It is important to highlight that this group as well as other Protestants focused their work on urban areas. That is why the first four regions where they settled, the same places that today are a strong Quaker reference in the country, are the cities of Gibara (1900), Holguín (1901), Banes (1903), and Puerto Padre (1903).

4. THE WORK OF THE QUAKERS

In this way, if it comes to religious heritage in the North eastern region of Cuba, it is not possible to deal with the subject without mentioning the Evangelic Church of Friends and all the history they have accumulated for over a century. One of the features that characterized this religious group along the years was the building of churches and schools in the places they settled. This, among others, was one of the main reasons why they were so gladly welcomed among the population of each the regions. It is necessary to state that by the beginning of the XX century, Cuba was a country where most of the population was illiterate and the Quakers arrived to bring the light of knowledge.

The first school was founded in Holguín in 1902, (Colegio Los Amigos de Holguín), whose first lesson's day was on September 15 of that year. This way the Quakers became the first religious group in creating schools of every level (from elementary to high school) in the region.

The schools adapted to the needs of the population of each area, in such areas where poverty was a predominant sign, they taught and offered cognition to all those who

needed it. This was a fact in places like Gibara, starting point of the work. In other cities, like Holguín, where there were wealthy people and families who wanted their children to have the best of educations, they charged the registration to the schools. This was the way of maintaining the institution since each of these schools survived thanks to their own earnings. However, only those who weren't followers of the beliefs of the group had to pay the fee, since the Quakers admitted anyone who wanted to learn in their schools, atheists, Catholics, or belonging to any other Protestant group. The work in education developed by the Quakers increased, and was perfected in such a way that they soon became a reference related to education.

In spite of the fact that we are referring to an Evangelic school, the academic orientation was basically laic. The Quakers looked for a greater influence, and cared for children and young people. Nevertheless, they didn't impose their faith, and they even encouraged children in their schools belonging to other denominations to be faithful to their own churches.

Among the reasons why these schools earned their prestige, and why the population looked up to them was the pedagogical competence of their teachers, the theoretical-practical integration of the curriculum, and the development of other activities like sports, musical groups and bands, etc. The school of Holguín, for instance, was known as the *Dean of the schools* in the Eastern region. Many of the graduates of these schools were and some still are people who honorably represent the values these schools promoted. They are well-known scholars, university professors or have chairs in the government. In other words, many of the graduates of the schools still build the Cuban society.

The Quakers, as well as other denominations, were distinguished by other social works like caring for providing a clean water source for the population in each of the areas, helping the poor with whatever they could, and no religious interest was followed by these actions since they didn't put pressure on the needed to attend church.

Quakers have maintained their work for over a century, a difficult task to perform if we take into account the characteristics of the Quaker cult, meditation in silence, silent prayer too, in a country such as Cuba, where a strong identity feature is the kinesthetic manifestation. That is, as a cultural characteristic, Cuban feel the need for the use of a highly expressive body language in order to keep a conversation, and in every aspect of human life. This implies the greater development and increase in number of followers for Protestant groups that follow more charismatic ways, like Methodists, Baptists, etc. However, the Quakers have learned how to preserve their church in the region, without changing much the methods of expression of their beliefs. Although, it must be said, that the group does not achieve big amounts of followers

as other Protestant groups do.

To talk about Quakers in Cuba is to talk about the Quakers in the North Eastern region. Their ways and beliefs have intertwined with the identity features of the people of this region, becoming a part of the history and culture of the area. Though during the first part of the XX century they lived the beginning and the gold age of the denomination, they are still recognized as an important part of the society. Furthermore, the buildings they created along the years and where they developed most of their work, most of which still stand, are main pieces in the religious heritage of the region, therefore of the cultural heritage. The tangible and the intangible work developed by the Quakers in Cuba cannot be separated from the identity of the Cuban people.

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